

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at a Dinner for Senator C. William Nelson and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in Miami, Florida

March 4, 2011

Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, everybody. Everybody have a seat. We're among friends here. We don't have to stand on ceremony.

Let me begin by just thanking Michael and Judy and the whole Adler clan for their incredible friendship and support and hosting us in this elegant setting. I was just in Michael's study—I assume it was Michael's because it had only golf stuff in there. *[Laughter]* And I think it was a testament to what an extraordinary contribution this family has made to the country and to the State of Florida and the Democratic Party that there was a wonderful picture of Joe Biden—black hair—*[laughter]*—hair—*[laughter]*—and—but the picture was with Michael's dad, who was a great friend of Joe's. And what's continued during that time, I think, is a friendship not only between Michael and the Vice President, but Michael and Judy and myself, who were early supporters of mine when I was still running for the United States Senate. Their kids, and now grandkids, are just wonderful folks. Their mom is extraordinary. And so please, everybody, give them a big round of applause.

We also have with us two of the finest Senators that I know—one of them who hails from the wonderful State of Washington. Some of you remember she got elected as the soccer mom in tennis shoes. She basically looks the same as when she got elected. I don't know if she's still wearing tennis shoes, but I can tell you I campaigned with her back in Washington State last time, and the connection that she's able to make with folks who just inherently understand she's looking out for them, she trusts—they trust her. They know that she's one of them. She brings that spirit to the Senate every day. Patty Murray, we're thrilled that she is here.

And my dear friend, Bill Nelson, who—being a great United States Senator is only the second greatest thing that he's ever done. Actually, it is the third greatest thing he's ever done. The first was marrying Grace and having those wonderful kids. The second was being in space, which is very cool. And the third is representing Florida each and every day in an outstanding fashion. Please give Bill a big round of applause.

And finally, one of the great stars of the party, somebody who—if I'm in a foxhole, I want her there with me, because—you're wonderful too—*[laughter]*—but I was referring to somebody who's just doing a great job each and every day in the House of Representatives, Debbie Wasserman Schultz.

Anyway, look, you guys are friends, so I'm not going to give a long speech. I want to talk to you a little bit about where I think we are as a country and where we need to go and why Florida is going to be so important.

We've gone through a little over 2 years of the toughest economy that we've seen in this country since the 1930s. And I think that most of us here are so blessed and so fortunate that although we've worried about the economy, we maybe haven't felt its full impact. But when you travel around the country, there are millions of people who are still out of work, hundreds of thousands of folks who are worried about losing their home, young people who wonder if they can still afford college. It's been a tough time.

And what's remarkable is not how frustrated people have been, or in some cases, how angry people have been. What's remarkable is actually how resilient people have been. I could not be prouder of the American people, because through extraordinary hardship the overwhelming majority of people have continued to be great parents and great neighbors, great coworkers, great teachers, great firefighters, great police officers, great small-business people. Through thick and through thin, they've continued to contribute to their communities and coach Little League and participate in the important issues of the day. And now what we're seeing is that having gone through the toughest time in recent memory, the country is on the rebound. The country is on the move.

We got a jobs report today that showed that unemployment has dropped to its lowest level in 2 years. We have seen 15 consecutive months of private sector job growth. The unemployment rate now is below 9 percent, and the trendlines are good. And part of that has to do with the efforts of people like Bill and Patty and Debbie, to be able to, during the lame duck session, shape a piece of legislation that cut taxes for everybody through the payroll tax cut, help businesses to make sure that they could invest in the future. And that has put our economy on a steady-growth mode that I believe is going to continue for several years.

But—and here's a big but—even before this recession, we had a lot of problems in this economy that were structural in nature. We had some long-term challenges that had been kicked down the road time and time and time and time again. We still have too much dependence on foreign oil. We still have underinvestment in our infrastructure. We still have a—what used to be a massive and consistent investment in research and development in science and technology that had declined over the last several years.

And we still aren't doing a good enough job educating our kids. We used to have the highest college graduation rates in the world; we don't have that anymore. We rank 15th and 21st in math and science when you compare us to other countries in the world.

And so we understood that we've got a lot of work to do, and we also understood that we're doing this all in the midst of recovery from a recession that has really blown a hole through the Federal budget and through State budgets, which makes it all the more difficult for us to tackle these big challenges.

But what I have been talking about since the State of the Union, what I talked about here in Florida and what I know Bill is talking about and Debbie is talking about and Patty is talking about is that for all these challenges, I'm confident that if we make good choices now, we're going to meet these challenges not just for the short term but for the long term.

We just—I went over to this school—Miami Central High School; State champs in football, which the football team was there, and they were very big. They were very large. [Laughter] And Donna Shalala was there, and she said it was to help promote education policy, but secretly, I think, she was doing some recruiting still for the Hurricanes. [Laughter]

But that's not the reason we chose this school. This is a school that a decade ago had a 36 percent graduation rate. A third—only a third of the students said they felt safe when they were at school. There was one room at the school called the "Fish Bowl" because it flooded so consistently. On the State exams it got "F"s and "D"s for 10 consecutive years. And this school, because of a vibrant principal and because of school reform efforts, both at the State level, but also assistance from the Federal level, has now transformed itself.

It's now got a 63 percent graduation that's moving up. When we went into a science lab where kids—almost all from minority and low-income backgrounds—were working with

robots. And they had used computer programming to design the robots, and they were running around and moving, swirling, and picking stuff up. And they were explaining to me how it worked, and I was nodding, pretending like I understood what was happening. [*Laughter*]

And when you talked to these kids you said to yourself, you know what, there's no reason that we can't replicate this all across Florida and all across the country if we're able to make the wise investments that are necessary to make right now.

And so over the next several months, there's going to be a big debate in this country. And a lot of it is going to revolve around how we get our deficits and our debt under control, and that's going to be an important debate because we can't sustain the spending path that we're on.

And I've put forward a budget that says we're going to freeze discretionary domestic spending for the next 5 years. We're freezing pay for Federal workers for a couple of years. As hardworking as they are, they're going to be making some sacrifices. We're going to be making some cuts in some programs that I think work but, frankly, right now we just can't afford them. We're consolidating the Federal Government. We're selling 14,000 unused Federal buildings that will save us huge amounts of money that we can then redirect. We're going to make some very difficult decisions.

But the tests of whether or not we emerge stronger rather than weaker over the next several months is, are we able to both make the cuts that are needed, save the money that's necessary, and then still make the investments in those kids at Miami Central, in the infrastructure of this State and States all across the country—the investments in research and development, in clean energy and biotechnology that will create the businesses and jobs for the future—are we able to do that? That's going to be the debate.

It's not going to be a debate about whether we need to cut spending. We are going to be cutting spending. The question is, are we going to be doing it wisely, and are we going to make sure that everybody makes some sacrifices, that it is shared sacrifice? And if there's anything that the Democratic Party should be standing for, must stand for—if there's anything that my Presidency, I hope, stands for—is the notion that we're all in this together and that in good times everybody shares in opportunity and in tough times everybody shares in sacrifice. And it's not done on the backs of the poor or seniors or the vulnerable.

That's what's going to be happening here domestically. Now, obviously, internationally we've got a few things that I have to tend to as well. [*Laughter*] I don't know if you guys saw my press conference with President Calderon. The first question was, what are you going to do about the NFL strike? I said, you know what, if some billionaires and millionaires can't figure out how to divide up \$9 billion, I can't help them because I've got a few other things to do.

But when you look at what's happening across the—around the world, what's happening in the Middle East is a manifestation of new technologies, the winds of freedom that are blowing through countries that have not felt those winds in decades, a whole new generation that says, I want to be a part of this larger world and I want to have some say in what happens.

Now, that's a dangerous time, but it's also a huge opportunity for us, because America is built on liberty and innovation and dynamism and technology. And all the forces that we're seeing at work in Egypt are forces that naturally should be aligned with us, should be aligned with Israel—if—if we make good decisions now and we understand, sort of, the sweep of history.

I met with a group of Jewish leaders in the White House this week, the presidents of all the major Jewish organizations, and I told them we have to be sober. We can't be naive about the changes that are taking place in the Middle East. Our commitment to Israel security is inviolable, it is sacrosanct, but we should not be afraid of the possibilities of the future.

It does mean that we're going to have to be engaged, and we're going to have to be involved, and we're going to have to reach out. And there are going to be some bumps along the road.

But I'm actually confident that 10 years from now we're going to be able to look back, potentially, and say this was the dawning of an entirely new and better era, one in which people are striving not to be against something, but rather to be for something; where young people start saying, you know what, I'm not interested in tearing somebody else down. I'm interested in how I can build my country up, and how I can create businesses, and how I can have opportunity and find work that's fulfilling and support a family.

But I'm—we're going to have to seize that moment as well. So domestically we've gone through a lot of changes. If we are willing to make good choices now, then I think we're going to be that much stronger for it. Internationally, the world is going through huge changes, but we are perfectly poised to make the 21st century, again, the American century.

But all of this is going to require leadership. It's going to require a steady hand. It's going to require hard work. And it's going to require you, because, frankly, I can't do this stuff by myself. We can't transform schools unless we've got great teachers and unless we've got great parents and community members who are interacting with and who are willing to get engaged and get involved.

I can't deliver for the great State of Florida unless I've got Bill Nelson standing by my side and I've got Debbie Wasserman Schultz on TV making my case. *[Laughter]*

I can't get reelected and make sure that we're carrying on the mandate that you gave us 2½ years ago unless I've got everybody here all in. And when I say "all in," I mean all in. I don't—you know how we operate. We don't just want your money. We want your time, we want your energy, we want your ideas. We want you passionate about this being important.

When I won the Presidency a couple of years ago, it wasn't because I was the best-connected candidate. It wasn't because I had the easiest name to pronounce. *[Laughter]* The reason was because we tapped into something that wasn't just about, sort of, traditional politics; it wasn't just about, sort of, special interests and who's going to be for who because that person checked a box on this particular issue or that particular issue. It was something more substantial, I'd like to think. It had to do with a recognition that the world was changing and that we weren't going to respond to that with fear. We were going to respond to it with hope.

And that if we met this new world with confidence, if we reminded ourselves of what is best about America, which is that through all these changes, we constantly adapt better than anybody else. We may be arguing about it, we may debate about it, we may go through moments of ugliness, but eventually we keep on thinking—moving forward. We stay young as a country. And that's what we captured during the campaign.

We've now gone through 2 tough years. And some of us are beaten down and worn out. And the last midterm, obviously, was very tough. And I'm grayer and looking a little older than I did. People don't say, "Oh, look at that young President" anymore. *[Laughter]* Yes, he looks

like the President. He looks—[laughter]. But you know, in each of us I think that spirit still exists and that sense of hope still exists.

And we have good reason to be hopeful, because we've done extraordinary things over these last 2 years, because of your help. Because of your help, we yanked this economy out of what could have been a great depression. Because of your help, we passed a historic health care bill. Because of your help, we ended "don't ask, don't tell." Because of your help, we are making enormous progress on the education front. Because of your help, we made the largest investment in clean energy in our history. Because of your help, we have transformed our foreign policy so that America is, once again, respected around the world.

That's because of you. I need you to do it again. That's what tonight is all about. And I promise you this is not the last time you're going to see me here in Florida, all right? [Laughter] I love you guys.

God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:17 p.m. at the Adler residence. In his remarks, he referred to dinner hosts Michael M. and Judith S. Adler, and their children David, Matthew, and Rachel; Bernyce "Bunny" Adler, mother of Michael M. Adler; Grace C. Nelson, wife of Sen. Nelson, and their children Nan Ellen Dixon and C. William Nelson, Jr.; former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala; and President Felipe de Jesus Calderon Hinojosa of Mexico.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Senatorial candidates : Nelson, Senator C. William, dinner in Miami, FL.

Locations: Miami, FL.

Names: Adler, Bernyce "Bunny"; Adler, David; Adler, Judith S.; Adler, Matthew L.; Adler, Michael M.; Adler, Rachel; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Calderon Hinojosa, Felipe de Jesus; Dixon, Nan Ellen; Murray, Patricia L.; Nelson, C. William; Nelson, C. William, Jr.; Nelson, Grace; Shalala, Donna E.; Wasserman Schultz, Deborah.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, repeal; Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Business and industry : Domestic investment, tax breaks; Democratic Party : Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : High school dropout rate; Education : Minority students; Education : Parental involvement; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Standards and school accountability; Education : Teachers; Education: Low-income students; Education: Science and math programs; Egypt :: Democracy efforts; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job losses; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: U.S. production; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Foreign sources; Florida : Democratic Party events; Florida : Miami Central High School in Miami; Florida : President's visit; Foreign policy, U.S. : Diplomatic efforts, expansion; Government organization and employees : Federal buildings, operating cost inefficiencies, elimination efforts; Government organization and employees : Federal employee pay freeze; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Israel : Relations with U.S.; Israel: Relations with Arab States; Mexico : President; Middle East :: Democracy efforts; Science and technology : Research and development; Sports : Football;

Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts;
Voluntarism.

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